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2 Can you teach me to speak? Oral practice and anxiety in a language MOOC

Zsuzsanna Bárkányi¹

Abstract

The present chapter examines learners' beliefs and attitudes with regard to speaking in a learning environment that is neither formal nor non-formal. The main research question is whether learners perceive Language Massive Open Online Courses (LMOOCs) as a completely informal context that is free of anxiety or rather as a virtual classroom where Foreign Language classroom Anxiety (FLA) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) is present. Data were obtained from over 200 beginner learners on self-reflective questionnaires and forum discussions. Results indicate that learners have a positive attitude towards language learning on LMOOCs, but FLA is present in this asynchronous speaking environment too and needs to be addressed by the course instructors.

Keywords: LMOOCs, Spanish, foreign language anxiety, informal learning.

1. Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) can be perceived to be half-way between formal and non-formal learning. On the one hand, they are formal in that they have a structured, pre-designed content, and are facilitated by an instructor and offered by an educational institution. On the other hand, they are self-paced, occur outside the classroom, are usually not accredited, and imply a

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leisurely activity for many learners, all of which are features that characterise informal learning.

LMOOCs are unique among MOOCs in that language learning is mainly skill-based rather than only knowledge-based (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2015; Halliday, 1993), and acquiring these skills necessarily involves interaction with other speakers. The importance of affective factors, such as motivation and anxiety, in these interactions and in L2 acquisition in general, has long been recognised. The term Foreign Language Anxiety was created by Horwitz et al. (1986) and refers to a specific type of anxiety that learners might experience across all language activities. The least anxiety-provoking language learning activity is reading comprehension (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997) while the most anxiety-provoking one is speaking (e.g. Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1990, 1999). Most researchers agree that FLA has a negative impact on learners' performance (see MacIntyre, 2017, and the references therein).

Research shows that online environments and Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) might create low anxiety language learning contexts which are beneficial for many learners (Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005, among others). There are few studies addressing the development of speaking skills in online learning environments. Rodrigues and Vethamani (2015) showed that learners in an online conversation programme with synchronous sessions showed bigger improvement in their speaking skills than the control group. Jauregi et al. (2011) found significant effects for CMC in willingness to speak with native speakers. Rubio (2015) examined the gains in pronunciation and comprehensibility on an LMOOC vs. on a face-to-face (f2f) course and concluded that improvement was larger on the LMOOC, mostly owing to the amount and types of feedback. Melchor-Couto (2016) and Reinders and Wattana (2015) demonstrated that language learners performing oral interaction activities in virtual world contexts exhibited lower anxiety levels than in traditional classroom settings. Thus, LMOOCs with no f2f interaction and no synchronous CMC present an interesting environment to observe affective variables such as FLA which is often experienced in classroom settings.

2. Method

The Spanish for Beginners Programme offered by The Open University on FutureLearn comprises six four-week courses with four to six hours of study per week covering the syllabus at A1 of the CEFR. Qualitative data was collected from over 200 learners on the first presentation of the Spanish for Beginners 3 course through open-ended questions on reflective questionnaires and discussions in the forums. The texts obtained in this way were thematically coded and analysed. At this point, a descriptive and exploratory approach was taken and a manual process followed. The emerging topics were highlighted and organised into broader thematic categories. Discourse referring to FLA was divided into sub-themes to gain a better understanding and a comprehensive view of learners' anxiety levels. In the present chapter, we analyse the responses and comments referring to the attitudes regarding the speaking activities proposed in the LMOOC. Note that spoken interactions in this learning environment are asynchronous, they consist of recording one's voice and uploading the file in the discussion forum, for instance, describing your daily activities or answering to audio prompts.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Learner attitudes

Most learners had positive feelings towards language learning and the acquisition of speaking skills on our LMOOC under scrutiny; 79.43% of our respondents indicated that listening and speaking skills can be learnt in this context just as well as reading and writing skills. Half of the participants (45.96%) completed the speaking tasks, i.e. the recording activities, however, when it came to sharing them on the discussion forum only 21.49% did so. The reasons for not uploading their recordings fall into three broad categories: (1) technical issues, (2) lack of motivation, and (3) anxiety. Technical issues generally involve the lack of adequate equipment (e.g. a microphone) and lack of familiarity with recording tools. Learners were often hesitant to share their recordings because they thought that they would not receive feedback or would not receive appropriate

constructive feedback. The use of adjectives like *intimidating*, *not confident enough*, *embarrassed*, *shy*, etc. indicate varying levels of speaking anxiety.

3.2. Foreign language anxiety

Learners' comments reflect that they were not confident enough to record themselves or they felt intimidated and embarrassed to upload their recordings. In many cases, a high level of anxiety can be observed in the comments of those students too who did complete the speaking tasks. Comments belonging to this group have been coded and analysed according to topic, which resulted in three major categories: (1) humour, (2) expressions of effort, and (3) explicit expressions of 'classroom' anxiety.

Humour is well-known for being helpful in adverse situations. It has been observed (e.g. [Demjén, 2016](#)) that people with serious illnesses in life-threatening situations often use humorous discourse to talk about frightening, sensitive, taboo experiences to alleviate the psychological impact of their condition. FLA is far from a life-threatening condition, however, a number of comments in the discussion forum contain humorous discourse, especially self-irony to reduce anxiety. Comments like "I think it will require more listening as I can roll my rr's but I sound like a drunken lowlander singing" show that humour is helpful in distancing from the embarrassment as if it was not the learner who has a problem with the pronunciation of the *r* sound in Spanish, but a drunken lowlander. At the same time, the opportunity to laugh together gives a feeling of collective empowerment in a situation where the speaker feels less powerful. The feeling of a supportive learning community is an essential component of a successful and enjoyable learning experience and is encouraged and facilitated by the instructors of the beginners' Spanish courses.

Reflections on the learning effort like "Struggled with the pronunciation, but I tried, and that's what counts" also provoke supportive comments from peers like "I really like your pronunciation", "well done", "we must practise" which no doubt helps reduce the anxiety involved in exposing oneself as well as the potential feelings of being laughed at. It also helps building a sense of a cohesive learning community.

Research indicates that language learners feel they perform better when interactions are via computer rather than f2f (Henderson, Huang, Grant, & Henderson, 2009). Similar conclusions have been found for FLA research. Ahangari and Sioofy (2013) found that a group of students who participated on a course where cooperative learning was integrated into computer-assisted language learning had a significant improvement in FLA when compared to other groups where no computer-assisted language learning occurred. Bárkányi and Melchor-Couto (2017) also observe that learners on an LMOOC find computer-mediated interactions less stressful than f2f communication. Despite the advantages of the computer-shielded learning environment, comments reveal anxiety with regard to speaking: e.g. “I’m still nervous about fellow students (strangers seems wrong to say) hearing my voice”, “sorry for my pronunciation”, and “please excuse my pronunciation”. Note that learners on our LMOOC hardly ever apologise for other language-skills like grammar or vocabulary.

3.3. Limitations of the study

Although our study has reached its aim in exploring FLA on LMOOCs, there were some unavoidable limitations regarding data collection. As participation in forum discussions and in the reflective pre- and post-course questionnaires was voluntary, our conclusions do not necessarily reflect the whole learning community of the course under scrutiny. Furthermore, post-course surveys typically have a 10% response rate as compared to pre-course surveys, and respondents often skip questions which results in uneven data.

3.4. What can instructors do?

Similarly to traditional classroom settings, the treatment of FLA in online contexts such as the language MOOC that is the subject of this study might involve:

- Skill-building activities, as higher levels of competence usually enhance confidence (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991); Bárkányi and Melchor-Couto (2017) show in a small-scale study that skill-building increases self-ratings on LMOOCs too.

- Awareness raising: pointing out that incorrect output also implies knowledge and helps learners form realistic goals.
- Regulating emotions: identifying false beliefs regarding speaking and encouraging appropriate risk-taking (Bekleyen, 2004).
- Constructive and encouraging feedback on pronunciation and spoken productions is also very much appreciated by learners as this comment shows: “thank you for all the encouragement. The course is great and I’m loving every minute of it – so xenoglossophobia has gone :-)”.

4. Conclusions

This chapter shows that LMOOC learners have positive attitudes towards acquiring speaking skills in this type of learning environment. Although speaking activities are not synchronous and thus do not involve f2f communication, most learners report feeling intimidated or embarrassed by the option of having to post their recordings. Learners who have the courage to complete the speaking activities often use various discourse strategies to alleviate the psychological burden of speaking anxiety. This clearly demonstrates that FLA is not only present in f2f classrooms but also on non-formal asynchronous online courses, where it can similarly have an inhibitory effect too, but generally to a lesser degree than in the f2f classroom.

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**Innovative language teaching and learning at university:
integrating informal learning into formal language education**

Edited by Fernando Rosell-Aguilar, Tita Beaven, and Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez

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